Learning and Reflective Practice

By Dr Ross J. Todd

Global research forums

I am en route to the 38th Annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarianship conference in Padua, Italy. Incorporating the 13th International Forum on Research in School Librarianship, the conference theme is 'Preparing Pupils and Students for the Future: School Libraries in the Picture'. The conference gives emphasis to the significant research in school librarianship, and focuses on the challenge of making explicit the connections between learning processes, school libraries and students' learning outcomes. While a substantial body of research exists, and even more will be presented at this conference, the ongoing challenge is to make this research a living reality in the minds of all school leaders and decision makers. The great American educational philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952) saw education as a continuous process of reflective experience. He posited that learning involves acting and reflecting on consequences: reflective experience and reflective thinking, and making connections between actions and results, enabling transferable understanding. This is no easy challenge. This is a call for all educators to engage in reflective practice, not just making the connections between actions and outcomes, but making these connections explicit so that the whole school can continue to learn and improve through them.

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En route to the IASL conference, I have taken time to wallow in the university city of Bologna, Italy. And it has been a delight to experience: a grand medieval cityscape, renaissance towers that lean every which way, many kilometres of arcaded porticoes, red brick palazzis, colourful piazzas, and delicious pastas. It was a real thrill to visit the University of Bologna, regarded as the first university to be established in the western world. According to the university's website, it received a charter from Frederick I Barbarossa in 1158, but in the 19th century, a committee of historians established that the foundations of the University were started in 1088, perhaps making it the oldest university in the world. Since 2000, the University's motto has been *Alma mater* studiorum (**Latin** for 'fostering mother of studies').

History of engagement

According to the historical records, there are some significant features about this place of learning. First, from its inception, the university has been 'declared a place where research could develop independently from any other power'. It was a place where learners could come together, to think freely and independently, to experiment with ideas, to discover – in safety and openness. Second, from the 14th century onwards, the great thinkers and masters of Grammar, Rhetoric and Logic, Medicine, Philosophy, Arithmetic, and Astronomy apparently began to collaborate to understand their common roots, and share ideals of progress and tolerance. The university's fame spread throughout Europe, and it grew rapidly. Over many centuries the university has established a tradition of intellectual rigor, inquiry and interpretation, and has been a hotbed of intellectual unrest, philosophical dispute and methodological challenge. Even today, students continue to engage actively in challenging intellectual discourses.

What a nice parallel with school libraries! As people have heard me say many times, a school library is the school's physical and virtual learning commons where inquiry, thinking, imagination, discovery, and creativity are central to students' information-to-knowledge journey,

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and to their personal, social and cultural growth. School libraries have to be a hotbed of intellectual unrest, where students engage with diverse, and at times, confronting and conflicting ideas, and participate in multiple intellectual discourses to develop their own deep knowledge. The school library is an experimental, collaborative and open learning centre that ranges across the whole school in every sense. It is where ideas are investigated and challenged in safety and with the intellectual scaffolding to nurture learning and the development of deep knowledge. Like Bologna University, school libraries are about fostering the *alma mater* of studies in the school: a collaborative, interdisciplinary learning centre across time and space.

10 Principles for the Future

This is even more challenging at a time when technological developments are creating richer potential for shared and interactive learning. I have been reading *The Future of Learning Institutions in a Digital Age* by Cathy N. Davidson and David Theo Goldberg. In it, they elaborate 10 principles for the future of learning, which they view as the grounds on which to develop transformative pedagogical practices. These principles, with my interpretive comments, are:

1. *Self-learning*: developing and engaging capacities to self-learn, discover and participate meaningfully in a global network of ideas.

2. *Horizontal structures*: involving collaboration with colleagues in teams, engaging multiple expertises and shared problem-solving.

3. *From presumed authority to collective credibility*: collaborative knowledge creation and communal assessment of credibility based on collective checking, reflective and critical skepticism, and group assessment.

4. *A de-centered pedagogy*: collaborative, participatory learning rather than teacher-centred pedagogy.

5. *Networked learning*: stressing cooperation, interactivity, mutuality, social engagement and powerful productivity.

6. *Open source education*: participating and sharing openly in the intellectual property of others, rather than these contributions being locked away in copyright protected publications that are deemed to be the current status of authoritative knowledge.

7. *Learning as connectivity and interactivity*: sustaining technological architectures that provide a seamless human and technological web of connectivity, interactivity and communication across time and space.

8. *Lifelong learning*: not learning for some distant future, but learning for tomorrow, learning anew, adaptable learning, re-learning as unknown and unprecedented challenges, situations and decisions arise.

9. *Learning institutions as mobilising networks*: creating and mobilising institutional cultures and structures that stress flexibility, interactivity, and outcome – enabling rather than assertive.

10. *Flexible scalability and simulation*: meeting all learning needs – individual, small scale, large scale, local, national and international, traversing social and cultural boundaries.

Conclusion

Bologna University encourages us to reflect on our past, our reason for being. But it also encourages us to go forward to the future, and engage in some transformative thinking that can shape the future and sustainability of school libraries. The 10 principles for the future of learning, as outlined by Davidson and Goldberg provide a useful set of starting point criteria for critical reflection and discussion in your schools. To what extent does your school library reflect these principles? What will it take to get there? From my perspective, this back-to-the-future journey is a necessity, not an option.

References

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